YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RAV SOLOVEITCHIK

by Rav Ronnie Ziegler

LECTURE #17: "The Lonely Man of Faith" (Continuation)

Part 3 - Two Types of Community

 According to Rav Soloveitchik, one cannot understand man exclusively as a solitary being; he must also be viewed as part of a community. This stems from the fact that existence in community is one of man's basic needs. Therefore, after delineating the features of Adam I and Adam II as individuals (see lecture #16), the Rav proceeds to examine the type of community each one creates.

COMMUNITY OF MAJESTY AND COMMUNITY OF FAITH

 To further his quest for dignity, Adam I enters into a pragmatic partnership with others, creating a "natural work community." Existentially, Adam I sees himself as a complete, self-sufficient being. Although he does not suffer from loneliness and feels no yearning for soul-to-soul communication with others, he does require their cooperation in order to promote mutually beneficial action. Thus, he creates a community of shared labor, not of shared existence. Since he does not consider himself in need of catharsis or redemption, the community he forms does not elevate his inner self.

 This kind of approach to the human need for community dominated political theory for centuries:

"The whole theory of the social contract brought to perfection by the philosophers of the Age of Reason reflects the thinking of Adam the first, identifying man with his intellectual nature and creative technological will and finding in human existence coherence, legitimacy and reasonableness exclusively. To the thinkers of the Age of Reason, man posed no problem. He was for them an understandable, simple affair... They saw man in his glory but failed to see him in his tragic plight." (p.30)

 Adam II, on the other hand, is sharply aware of "his tragic plight." Having been created alone, and subsequently becoming aware of his distinctness from the rest of nature (see Reference #1), he realizes that

"'To be' means to be the only one, singular and different, and consequently lonely. For what causes man to be lonely and feel insecure if not the awareness of his uniqueness and exclusiveness?" (pp.40-41)

 Adam II therefore seeks to create a "covenantal faith community," in which he will be able to overcome his sense of ontological incompleteness and loneliness by learning to communicate with others and to form a depth-connection with them. The recognition and validation of another person as unique as oneself entails relinquishing one's self-preoccupation and sense of all-inclusiveness. Therefore, for Adam II, forming a community is a sacrificial act, or what we have previously encountered in the Rav's writings as the act of tzimtzum (self-contraction or recoil - see lecture #4).

COVENANTAL COMMITMENT

 The covenantal faith community centers around shared commitments, not merely shared interests. Its members work together to "cleanse, redeem and hallow" their existences (p.33). The I and the Thou connect to each other by means of their mutual connection to the divine He (see Reference #2). This connection to God takes the form of an absolute commitment encompassing the totality of man's being: emotion, intellect, will and action. When two different people share this absolute and all-encompassing commitment to God, it allows them to overcome the barriers separating them from one another. Opening himself totally to God, man can open himself to other people as well, with shared values and goals serving as the basis for communication. Mutual commitment thus becomes the foundation of the existential community.

 The overcoming of barriers which separate individuals takes place, as I termed it when discussing "The Community" (lecture #4), along both the horizontal and the vertical axes. Members of a covenantal community join their contemporaries (the horizontal plane) through sympathy, love and common action. They express concern for each other's welfare via, for example, prayer and charity. This sense of fellowship and friendship redeems man by relieving him of his feeling of isolation and incompatibility with others. The "other" is no longer a stranger, an "It," who concerns me only to the extent that he can bring me benefit or harm. Instead, he becomes a "Thou," a person of equal and independent worth to whom I am committed and whom I engage in true dialogue.

 The gesture of friendship, however, does not characterize the community of Adam I.

"In the majestic community, in which surface-personalities meet and commitment never exceeds the bounds of the utilitarian, we may find collegiality, neighborliness, civility, or courtesy - but not friendship, which is the exclusive experience awarded by God to covenantal man who is thus redeemed from his agonizing solitude." (p.69)

 Within the covenantal community, moreover, Adam II overcomes his insecurity as a temporal being by infusing all his actions with meaning, linking them to the past in which the covenant originated and to the future in which it will ultimately be fulfilled. He joins the covenantal community of past and future generations (the vertical plane) through conveying the covenantal tradition.

"Within the covenantal community not only contemporary individuals but generations are engaged in a colloquy and each single experience of time is three-dimensional, manifesting itself in memory, actuality and anticipatory tension. This experiential triad, translated into moral categories, results in an awesome awareness of responsibility to a great past which handed down the divine imperative to the present generation in trust and confidence and to a mute future expecting this generation to discharge its covenantal duty conscientiously and honorably." (p.71 - see Ref. #3)

CONCEPTUALLY DISTINCT BUT INTERTWINING

 When the Rav writes (at the end of Chapter 7) that friendship or the three-dimensional time experience are categories of covenantal life, we should not mistakenly assume that he means that these can be found only among "religious" individuals. Rav Soloveitchik repeatedly stresses that his discussion here is typological - it deals with simple, ideal personalities, not with real, complex people. The two Adams are theoretical constructs representing different aspects of life. Adam I, at this stage of our discussion, represents a life oriented purely to external accomplishment and success. Therefore, he lives in the moment and is capable only of shallow working relationships with others. Adam II, on the other hand, experiences the depth-dimension of existence and is inwardly oriented. This is why the Rav says that "Friendship - not as a social surface-relation but as an existential in-depth-relation between two individuals - is realizable only within the framework of the covenantal community" (p.68). In addition, since he continually searches for meaning beyond the here-and-now, only Adam II can regard the past and the future as "experiential realities."

 Real people, of course, experience both the surface and depth-dimensions of life. The Rav's reason for separating these elements is to highlight the paradoxes implicit in our existence, stemming from the seeming incommensurability between these two dimensions of living. Furthermore, not only are real people complex, but the Rav acknowledges (in Chapters 8-10, primarily in Chapter 9) that even according to his theoretical model, there must be interaction between the two communities, resulting in mutual influence and the borrowing of ideas from each other. For example, he writes:

"In reality there are no pure typological structures and hence the covenantal and majestic communities overlap. Therefore, it is not surprising that we come across the three-dimensional time experience, which we have presented as typically covenantal, in the majestic community as well... However, this time awareness was borrowed by majestic history from covenantal history." (pp.72-73)

"Certain aspects of the doctrinal and normative covenantal kerygma [=message] of faith are of utmost importance to majestic man and are, in a paradoxical way, translatable into the latter's vernacular." (p.93)

"Since majestic man is in need of a transcendental experience in order to strengthen his cultural edifice, it is the duty of the man of faith to provide him with some component parts of this experience." (pp.97-98)

We will deal with this subject more fully when addressing the last three chapters of the book.

GOD AS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY

 The covenantal community is composed not just of Adam and Eve, but also of God Himself, since both God and man are parties to the covenant.

"Of course, even within the framework of this community, God appears as the leader, teacher, and shepherd. Yet the leader is an integral part of the community, the teacher is inseparable from his pupils, and the shepherd never leaves his flock." (p.45)

 The section discussing God as a member of the covenantal community (Chapter 5) presents several difficulties. Firstly, as I pointed out in lecture #4, although the leader is connected to his community, he is not always PART of the community. Moshe Rabbeinu, the leader of the Jewish People who lived in an isolated tent and covered his face with a veil, was quite remote from his compatriots; how much more so is this true regarding God! Secondly, while the Rav emphasizes freedom and mutuality in the assumption of the covenant on the part of both God and man, we cannot ignore the fact that it is God who sets the terms of the covenant. Also, man's "inalienable rights" to which the Rav refers were in fact granted to man by God!

 Finally, although it would seem that there exists a basic dialectic in Jewish thought regarding freedom vs. coercion in divine service ("Na'aseh ve-nishma" vs. "Kafa aleihem har ke-gigit" - "We shall do and we shall hear" vs. "God held the mountain over them like a cask"), the Rav here downplays coercion to the extent that he removes it almost entirely from the picture. (See the extended footnote on pp.45-46, where Rav Soloveitchik radically reinterprets the celebrated gemara [Shabbat 88a] depicting the Jews accepting the Torah under divine threat. It is important to note, however, that the Rav is not the only person who grapples with this gemara's conclusion ["mi-kan moda'a raba le-Oraita"] - it has troubled commentators for generations.)

 While it is not easy to defend the Rav's one-sided approach here, we can attempt to offer two possible justifications for it. First, in "U-vikkashtem Mi-sham" the Rav depicts a complex process whereby man can ultimately overcome the dialectic of coercion and freedom. While the details of this development lie beyond the scope of this lecture (we shall address them in the final installments of this series), perhaps it is possible to read "The Lonely Man of Faith" in light of the final reconciliation in "U-vikkashtem Mi-sham." (There are, in fact, many connections between these two works, which I hope to address in a future lecture.) Alternatively, perhaps we can suggest that Adam II experiences no coercion when confronted by the covenant, but Adam I does. In other words, each of us is composed of both Adams; the dialectic of freedom and compulsion results from the responses of different parts of our psyche to the covenantal experience. To be honest, however, we must admit that while Rav Soloveitchik offers two interpretations of the sense of compulsion which Chazal discuss, neither of them matches the suggestions above.

PROPHECY AND PRAYER

 In the covenantal community, God and man communicate by means of prophecy and prayer - the first is communication initiated by God, and the second is communication initiated by man. Both the prophetic and the prayer communities are covenantal for three reasons.

1. In both, a confrontation between God and man takes place.

2. The covenant is a threefold structure, linking I, Thou, and God. Thus, in their covenantal capacities, the prophetic and prayer communities link man both to God and to his fellow man. The prophet who receives the divine message must convey it to the community; he serves as their representative before God. Likewise, prayer must include others: one should pray WITH others and FOR others. Indicative of this is the fact that Jewish prayer is formulated in the plural.

"The foundation of efficacious and noble prayer is human solidarity and sympathy or the covenantal awareness of existential togetherness, of sharing and experiencing the travail and suffering of those for whom majestic Adam the first has no concern." (pp.59-60)

3. Both encounters, which aim to redeem man, are "crystallized and objectified in a normative ethico-moral message" (p.61). Biblical prophecy is not merely a mystical vision; rather, God revealed Himself to Moshe in order to give the Law, and to the other prophets in order to enforce it. The normative element of prophecy allows all members of the community to participate in the God-man encounter by taking part in the realization of the covenant. In other words, prophecy is relevant to everyone, not just to the select few (see Reference #4). Similarly, prayer entails committing oneself to God - it is only effective if a person is ready to cleanse himself in order to encounter God. In this manner, prayer becomes part of a total pattern of life. Since it is "the sublime prologue to halakhic action," prayer "does not occupy as prominent a place in the halakhic community as it does in other faith communities" (pp.65-66). Judaism centers on the entirety of one's daily life, not just on the synagogue.

DEDICATION

 Although lectures #16 and #17 have not done justice to the wealth of ideas contained in chapters 1-7 of "The Lonely Man of Faith," they have hopefully highlighted the main themes and will enable you to read the Rav's essay more easily. [There remains much of value to be mined from these chapters, particularly from the rich footnotes. Chapter 7, especially, contains many substantive comments of great interest regarding prayer. I intend to return to this chapter in future lectures on prayer in this series.] Having set forth the conceptual framework of the essay - the dichotomy of Adam I and Adam II - we are now in a position to directly address the problems posed at the essay's beginning (elaborated previously in lecture #15). Therefore, in the upcoming lectures, we will return to the ontological and historical loneliness of the man of faith, and will try to draw out the Rav's responses to these challenges.

 Before closing, I would like to return to the Rav's beautiful dedication of the essay to his wife:

"To Tonya: A woman of great courage, sublime dignity, total commitment, and uncompromising truthfulness."

Why does he single out these four attributes? Now we should be able to grasp the deeper significance of this tribute. "Sublime dignity" and "total commitment" are the characteristics of Adam I and Adam II respectively. Here the Rav indicates that his wife both understands and embodies the dialectic of majesty and redemption. Consequently, "great courage" and "uncompromising truthfulness" are necessary in facing up to the dilemmas posed by this form of existence.

 What makes these dilemmas "particularly difficult and agonizing" for the contemporary man of faith is the fact that he is not understood by modern society. By sharing the Rav's multiple and complex goals, Mrs. Soloveitchik helps mitigate and perhaps occasionally overcome the overwhelming sense of loneliness of "The Lonely Man of Faith." (This brings out the uniquely close nature of their relationship - she was perhaps the only person who truly understood him and to whom he could bare his soul.) Together they form an ideal community, united in both worldly endeavor and religious ideals. In truth, every marriage union should strive to embody both Adam I and Adam II elements, constituting both a pragmatic partnership and a covenantal relationship. Thus, although the essay's title highlights the author's loneliness, the dedication appearing beneath it shows that this loneliness is not as extreme as it could have been and offers hope for overcoming it.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE:

1. Rav Soloveitchik describes the unfolding of the I-awareness and man's alienation from nature in his essay "Confrontation" (which was his first published work in English). Although both "Confrontation" and "The Lonely Man of Faith" examine the same story, namely the creation of man as described in the first two chapters of Bereishit, they treat it very differently. While the former describes a PROGRESSION of three existential positions, the latter depicts a DIALECTIC of two approaches. What makes this particularly interesting is the fact that "Confrontation" was published in 1964 and "The Lonely Man of Faith" soon after in 1965! Despite the many differences between the two essays, it is important to note that they share a common theme: the autonomy of the faith commitment and the consequent difficulty in communicating it. However, they discuss this issue in different contexts. "Confrontation" deals with the problem of communication between different faith communities (in reply to the call for interfaith dialogue issued by the Second Vatican Council), and "The Lonely Man of Faith" deals with the problem of communication between religious man and secularized man. (Note that I say "secularized" and not "secular," because even a person who adheres to a religion can practice a secularized form of it.) The latter topic will be a major theme in lectures #18-20.

2. The structure of A connecting to B through mutual connection to C figures prominently also in "U-vikkashtem Mi-sham," where God and man connect to each other through their mutual cognition of the world and of Halakha.

3. Vertical and horizontal community; quantitative and qualitative time: see "Sacred and Profane," "U-vikkashtem Mi-sham," "The Community," and On Repentance ("Between the Individual and the Community").

4. The importance of action in the halakhic system was the subject of lecture #13; see especially the section on esoteric and undemocratic spirituality.